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BY
MAUDE ANNESLEY

New York
Paget Literary Agency
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“THE CURSE”

The sun was shining full on the face of a little man who came out of a porch and stood surveying his possessions with great complacency. Though he was a little man he had a very big name—Septimus Warrington Bennington.

As he stood watching the gate, the postman came and handed him two letters. One he seized excitedly and tore open:

“Dear Sir,

“If all the new apples which you have succeeded in producing are as good as the specimens you sent us, we will give you 5/ (five shillings) each for them.

“Kindly let us know how many you are prepared to send us and when. Also tell us the name you wish to give them.

“Awaiting your reply,

“Yours faithfully,

“THE SUPERIOR FRUIT COMPANY.

“M. A. Bentham, Secretary.”

Septimus was very pleased. He whistled a music-hall ditty and went into the house. Taking a key he opened the door of a large cupboard. In this were straw-covered shelves up to the ceiling. On some of these were apples. He mounted a pair of steps, counted the apples and made notes in a notebook, occasionally whistling the same exceedingly cheerful tune.

“I wonder how many more there are on the tree,” he said aloud as he locked the cupboard door.

Taking up a basket he went out of the back door, down a path, and opened a gate into an orchard. After he had shut the gate he stopped and listened. He thought he heard someone moving. Keeping by the hedge, he worked his way round and peered through the foliage at a very special tree, whose trunk was guarded by rails. He gave a loud exclamation and started to run.

The cause of his excitement was an old woman

who was stooping down and picking up apples from the ground, which she placed in her apron. Septimus was horrified. When he arrived at the tree he was stuttering with fury.

"Don't you dare come in here again, or I will call the police," he yelled before he reached her.

The woman looked up, her old face was gnarled and marked like the bark of the apple trees round her. She clutched her apron full of apples tightly.

"I want some apples for my sick son," she said obstinately.

"They're my apples," cried Septimus. "I have been years getting them to grow. They're prize apples. How dare you come here?"

Her face puckered up and she looked at him with bright black eyes.

"My son wants apples," she reiterated.

"My prize apples!" he spluttered. "Here, you give me those apples you have taken." He made a movement towards her.

She looked for some time as if she intended to hold on to her apron, while her eyes met his with a steady stare. Then she shrugged her shoulders, dropped its corners and let the apples roll all over the ground.

Septimus almost screamed.

"They'll be bruised," he cried, as he grovelled, picking them up tenderly and putting them in his basket, while the woman still stared at him.

"Let me have some," she said, with a certain amount of pathos.

He sprang to his feet and pointed at a distant gate.

"Off you go," he said, and she turned and walked away, followed by the enraged owner of the orchard.

"How dare you come here," he repeated. "They're my apples, and what I have I hold."

Outside the gate the woman turned and looked at him.

"What you have you hold, eh?" she said in a curious, far-away voice. Then she lifted her arm perfectly straight and pointed at him. "Well, what you have you shall hold when you least expect it. You shall

see! The curse of the gipsy is on you. You shall hold for minutes at a time!"

She made a sign in the air, muttered a few words, under her breath, drew her shawl closer around her and went off down the path.

"Damned impertinence!" said Septimus, proceeding to fasten up the gate securely. Then he went back to the tree, stooped down and carefully examined all the apples. He found two were bruised, and put them in his pocket. The others were perfect as far as he could see and he carried them to the cupboard to place them on the shelves. He took out the last apple to put at the end of the row, arranged the straw around it and then said, "Eh, what!" out loud. He threw down the empty basket and placed both hands on the apple, but it was stuck firmly to his right hand. He bent down and tried to see what was sticking.

"Some beastly wax, I suppose, the old brute put on it," he muttered crossly.

He put down a foot to back down the steps, and then came down with a crash, the steps across his knees. As he lay on the floor two servants came rushing in, a man and a woman. The man picked him up. "Did the steps slip, sir?" he said.

"I suppose so," said Septimus, groaning with pain. "Where's the apple?"

"Oh, dear, dear," said the servant sympathetically, "You must have fallen, sir, with it in your hand. Here it is and badly bruised, sir."

"It had glue on it or something," said Septimus, "that's what made me fall."

Biggins turned the apple over.

"No sir, there ain't no glue on it."

The cook examined it too, then Septimus. The apple, barring the bruises, was exactly as it had come from the tree. Septimus looked at his hand, but there was no stickiness to be found.

"Strange thing," he muttered. "I was certain there was something odd about it. It stuck firmly." Then he proceeded to tell the sympathetic Biggins and the cook the story of the gipsy woman.

In the afternoon he went to call at a house about ten minutes walk away. He was shown into a pretty drawing room where a little, fluffy woman was sitting reading.

"How do you do, Mrs. Seaton," he said, holding out his hand.

She shook hands languidly, smiling upon him. He held her hand tightly and got rather red. She also blushed, giggled a little and tried to pull her hand away, but she could not do so. Suddenly she became agitated. "Quick, quick," she cried. "There's my husband coming. You know how jealous he is." She tugged at her hand. Septimus tugged too, but quite uselessly. There was a noise outside the door and in came Mr. Seaton, six foot three, very broad, with the appearance of a prize fighter on holiday. The smile faded from his face as he saw the clasp of the hands and he glared. Septimus stammered violently. "It—it's the muscles of my hand gone wrong," he exclaimed agitatedly.

Mr. Seaton advanced. "Drop my wife's hand, sir."

Septimus tried harder. Mrs. Seaton was nearly weeping. Mr. Seaton's right hand shot out, Septimus fell. Mrs. Seaton fell with him. Septimus still holding her hand. A small table laden with ornaments fell with them. There was a terrible commotion. Mr. Seaton raged. Mrs. Seaton wept. Septimus stammered out half sentences interspersed with groans. Suddenly the hands came apart, and Septimus put his up to his bruised shoulder.

"I tell you I can't help it," he stuttered. "The same thing happened this morning. There is something wrong with my hand."

"Wrong with your hand," roared Mr. Seaton. "Yes, there is something wrong with your hand. Out you go, sir!"

While Mrs. Seaton got up from the floor and sat sobbing on the sofa, Septimus was marched to the hall door by an infuriated husband, who looked as if he would like to kick his visitor down the steps.

Septimus walked slowly down the road to his own house.

"What the devil is it?" he kept muttering. "It can't be anything to do with that old hag. I don't believe that sort of stuff."

When he got home he called in Biggins and asked him if everything were prepared for the next day.

"I want everything to be very nice, you know, Biggins," he said. "Mrs. Warrington is very particular and I must keep on the right side of her."

"Yes, sir," said Biggins. "I quite realize that, sir." He had been with Septimus for many years and he knew that his master had great expectations from the Aunt who was coming to stay.

"Everything's nice, sir. I think Mrs. Warrington will be quite pleased."

CHAPTER II.

The next day Septimus' Aunt, a large lady with a well-preserved figure, arrived in the morning, before lunch, which was excellently cooked, much to the delight of Mrs. Warrington who was fond of her food. They went into the drawing room afterwards and Septimus was exceedingly polite, placing cushions for her back and giving her a little table by her side for coffee.

"Are you engaged yet, Septimus," she asked, with a twinkle in her eyes.

Septimus blushed.

"No, Auntie, not yet," he said bashfully. "I'm going to propose as soon as I can screw up my courage to the sticking point, but I'm so afraid of her thinking that I want her money."

"Nonsense, my dear," said his Aunt. "You're quite comfortable here and you know that you will have my money when I have gone."

Septimus looked uncomfortable and made some incoherent remarks in which the words, "Not thinking of that," "Should hate to have," "Quite a young woman" seemed inextricably mixed.

However, Mrs. Warrington appeared to understand, for she purred.

"By the way, dear," she said soon after. "I sold that property. Here's the letter and the cheque. I received them this morning."

"Five thousand pounds," said Septimus, as he looked at the cheque. "Good biz, I'm so glad."

Then he read the letter, folded it and the cheque, put them into the envelope and handed it to her. She held out her hand for it. Suddenly Septimus got very agitated as he felt his fingers tighten on the envelope.

"All right, dear, I've got it," said Mrs. Warrington.

"Er," said Septimus, "I—er—"

"Give it to me, Septimus," said Mrs. Warrington rather sharply.

"I can't," said Septimus, vainly striving to loosen his hands.

His Aunt, a somewhat hot-tempered woman, rose in her wrath.

"The cheque is not endorsed. It's no use your taking it," she said sharply.

"I don't want it," said Septimus, almost sobbing.

Mrs. Warrington pulled. She got very angry indeed.

"If you'd only listen, Auntie, for a moment. I tell you there's something wrong with my hand," he managed to get out at last.

"Tommy rot," said Mrs. Warrington and pulled violently.

"Please listen, Auntie," he implored. But Mrs. Warrington's rage was such that she was now beyond listening.

She gave a sharp tug. The letter tore in half and she subsided very heavily and very ungracefully on the floor with Septimus on top of her. She rose as elegantly as she could under the circumstances, marched to the bell and rang it.

Biggins came in. She turned to him, totally unconscious that her toupee was very much on one side, and said in a voice spluttering with fury: "Tell my maid to pack. Order by motor round. I am leaving here by the next train."

Septimus fell on his knees and tried to clutch his

Aunt's dress, which she swept out of his way. He implored her to stay, his pleadings being mixed with incoherent remarks, which included "Jealous husbands," "Apples," "Gipsy women" and various other objects, which only confirmed Mrs. Warrington in her idea that her nephew drank. She did not vouchsafe one word of response, but sailed from the room. Septimus covered his face and groaned. Then he looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "WHAT YOU HAVE YOU SHALL HOLD WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT. YOU SHALL SEE! THE CURSE OF THE GIPSY IS ON YOU. YOU SHALL HOLD FOR MINUTES AT A TIME."

"Is it possible?" he said, staring wildly at the wall.

Soon he heard a motor at the hall door and he went out in the hall. His Aunt and her maid came down the stairs as he appeared.

"I implore you, Auntie. It was not my fault. My hand goes wrong sometimes."

She waved him off sternly, walked out to the motor and drove off without a single glance.

Septimus sat on the door-step and buried his face in his hands. "There goes fifty thousand pounds," he said disconsolately, and when Biggins came out and muttered something, turned round and swore lustily and lengthily at him.

After some minutes of absolute despondency, he got up slowly and went into the house, and with some difficulty composed a letter to his Aunt.

Though he knew that she would not credit the idea of a "curse" (he did not himself really), he yet made up his mind to tell her the whole story from the beginning. After the history of Mrs. Seaton and her husband he remarked pathetically, "You know me, Auntie, too well, to think for a moment that I could have had any *arriere pensee*. I am far too much in love with Biddy to have the idea of any other woman in my mind.

"Of course, I do not believe such absurd rubbish as the gipsy's words having effect on my hand! I think that it is a mere coincidence that the muscles have

gone wrong, but I am going up to town to see a specialist about it.

"I wish you would believe me when I say that I have told you the truth in every particular. I had no more wish to hold your letter than I had to hold the apple, or Mrs. Seaton's hand."

"There," he thought sorrowfully, "That *ought* to calm the old lady down. Tomorrow I shall go up to town and see Sir James Jobson."

He did go to town the next day. His hand was x-rayed and thoroughly examined with no result. Apparently it was perfectly sound.

CHAPTER III.

The following morning he was shaving very carefully when, to his fury, he cut his chin. He got a roll of plaster, cut a little piece out of it, which he placed on his chin. Then he went to put the roll away, and he found that he could not let go of it. He sat down on a chair and said quietly, "Now let us be calm." He took hold of the other side of the roll with his left hand and pulled. It resulted in a large piece of plaster tearing off, the sticky side up, and, being a patent plaster which he had found very efficacious, part of it stuck to his left hand. He tried to tear it off with his teeth.

After five minutes of strenuous exertion, the result was Septimus, with dressing gown, hands, face and head covered with small pieces of plaster, looking somewhat like a walking advertisement of somebody's or other's patent warranted not to come off. He was ashamed to call for Biggins, so he tiptoed to the bathroom and proceeded to soak off the small pieces, while all the time the roll of plaster was firmly grasped in his right hand. Just as he was hanging head downwards over the bath, dipping his face in the water, the roll fell from his hand to the bottom of the bath and was irrevocably ruined.

Septimus, a very wet and dragged person, with a dribble of blood from his chin, returned to his bedroom

and stared at himself in the glass. He did not swear, it was beyond words. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "that is the end of it for today, I suppose, might have been worse."

In the afternoon he called on Biddy's parents and, to his joy, found only the lady of his heart at home. He was a shy little man, but fully realizing that he would never have a better opportunity, he managed with some difficulty the asking of the great question.

Biddy, a very pretty girl of the *petite* type, said "Yes" without any shyness at all, and Septimus heaved a sigh of relief and content.

After an hour had passed he said joyfully: "Now, Biddy, how about the ring? Would you mind coming with me to choose it? I'm such an ass at that sort of thing."

Biddy nodded. "I quite agree," she said, then she blushed. "I don't mean that you're an ass. I mean that it is much better for a girl to help. I simply *hate* some rings."

"All right," said Septimus. "We will go tomorrow. Where shall we go? Bond Street?"

"No," said Biddy, seriously. "We will go to Guildford. There is a very good jeweller there and Bond Street prices are simply absurd."

"Couldn't we go now? asked Septimus. "There's plenty of time, it's only five."

What girl could ever resist such a suggestion! Today is always better than tomorrow where a ring is concerned!

"All right," she said gaily. "I will order round the car now and you can drive me. I shan't be two minutes putting on my things!"

Twenty minutes afterwards, Septimus drove up to the jeweller's shop and they went in, she feeling somewhat important, he exceedingly shy. He looked so embarrassed that she took pity on him and asked the assistant herself for the rings. Various trays were laid before them on the glass counter. He lost his shyness in the interest of the discussion. She hesitated between three rings, trying on each in turn, and

holding her hand up for the light to catch it. Finally she decided and held her hand up for his admiration.

"All right," said Septimus. "I quite agree. It is very pretty indeed," and he took out his pocket book. Then he picked up another ring that was lying on the counter and held it up.

"I think this one is very pretty too," he said, "but perhaps you have made the right choice," and he started to put it down. With a terrible clutch at his heart he realized that the putting down was an impossibility.

"Er," he said, feeling very worried. It was no good holding the ring on the counter, so he lifted it again.

"But I don't want that one, dear," said Biddy. "Mine is here,"—turning her hand about like a gesticulating Frenchwoman.

The shopman suddenly looked alert. Septimus wiped his face with his handkerchief in his left hand. He thought rapidly: "This is the moment for self-control; it would never do to show myself a fool before her." He drew himself up and swaggered slightly.

"Er, I think I will take this one as well," he said as calmly as he could. "I think you said it was twenty-three pounds?"

The shopman bowed deeply and washed his hands. "Yes, sir."

Biddy cried: "But why, dear, I have chosen this one."

"I like this one," he said casually, "I am going to give it to you as well as the other."

Septimus could not manage to take out the notes separately with one hand, so he handed the wad to the shopman saying grandly: "Just count these will you? I think there are a few more than are necessary." Fortunately there were, and the shopman handed him back some which he stuffed into his pocket.

"Shall I put it in a case, sir?"

"No, thank you," said Septimus. "I will put it in my pocket," which he pretended to do, closing his hand over it as well as he could.

"You are a dear," said Biddy, after they had been bowed out of the shop. "Do let me see it."

"I will give it to you when we get back," whispered Septimus in her ear. "I want my reward for it."

Then he was faced with the appalling impossibility of driving the motor whilst he held the ring in his hand.

"Shall we walk a little?" he said in a lover-like way. "The car will be quite all right here."

Luckily she agreed, and they turned down a quiet road which led towards the country. He could not enjoy the walk as he passed the whole twenty minutes in an agitated effort to loosen the ring.

When they got home, Biddy's parents were still out, and he gave her the ring, not forgetting to take his reward.

"It's too bad," he said sadly, "that you are going away just now of all times."

"I quite agree," she said, rubbing her head against his shoulder, "but I won't stay one instant more than the week, I promise you. You will go to the station to see me off tomorrow, won't you darling, 11:42?"

CHAPTER IV.

The next morning he cut nearly all his late roses, and took a bouquet down to the station with him, carefully holding it in his left hand. He was rewarded by Biddy's joy at the flowers, which he put on the seat beside her.

He had got into the carriage, where they were alone, so was able to kiss her good-bye before he had to get out. He had been very careful not to touch her with his right hand and he slammed the door to with his left as the train began very slowly to move. Unfortunately she leant out and said something to him in a low whisper. Reaching up to hear her, he put his right hand on the handle of the door. Like magic his fingers clutched on it. He turned white with terror as he walked quicker and quicker by the side of the carriage. Then he realized something desperate must be done.

"The muscles of my hand have gone wrong," he screamed. "I cannot let go."

He was running now and had nearly arrived at the slant of the platform down to the line. The girl leant out of the window, shrieked and waved to the guard. Porters came tearing along the platform. The station master, a very fat man, tore too. Passengers leant out of the windows to see what all the noise was about. Septimus, running fast, was hurled down the slant of the platform. The tips of his toes could just touch the ballast of the permanent way, while his hand, stretched far overhead, was still glued tight to the door handle. Two porters caught him up, running with him and holding him. The driver, realizing by all the noise that something was the matter, looked out and quickly brought the train to a standstill. Biddy collapsed on the roses. Septimus was rapidly surrounded by a gesticulating crowd of porters, station master, guard and driver, besides several of the passengers, who had descended to investigate the matter. White and agitated, Septimus tried to explain. It is to be feared that his veracity was somewhat over-strained at the moment, as he gave them to understand that Sir James Johnson had found something radically wrong with his hand. The train stood there whilst various strong men tried to unwind his fingers from the handle, and the station master became hysterical over the delay.

Finally, adopting the brilliant suggestion of one of the porters, the door was unhinged and Biddy removed to another carriage.

It required Septimus' ardent, imploring looks to make her continue her journey at all. The procession that wound its way back to the station was peculiar. The station master, fat and exhausted, marched ahead. After came two porters, carrying the door, by the side of which was Septimus, holding on firmly to its now useless handle. The rear was brought up by various plate-layers and workmen who happened to be in the neighborhood. They reached the slant of the platform. The two perspiring porters

with the door gave little jerks at their burden as they mounted: Septimus, by this time very tired and miserable, hung slightly back, being more or less pulled with the door—just then his hand loosened suddenly and he spun backwards, indulging in an exceedingly ungraceful double somersault.

When he got home he had a whisky-and-soda and then lay collapsed in a chair for the rest of the day. He finally decided to tell Biggins that his hand was injured and enlist his aid in a bandage of the effending member. Thinking did not seem to help the matter at all. The more he thought, the more puzzled, angry and despairing he became.

CHAPTER V.

For a few days after the train episode, matters went smoothly owing to the bandage which Septimus was very careful to keep on his hand out-of-doors. He had little incidents with forks and garden rollers, but, as these were at his own home, he did not mind.

On the morning of the fifth day he received a letter from the Railway Company enclosing a bill which ran as follows:

	£.	s.	d.
For delay of train.....	3.	15.	0.
For workmen		17.	0.
For damage to door.....		14.	0.
	5.	6.	0.

Septimus bound a handkerchief round his head and went to his writing table. Here he drew up the following:

<i>Debit.</i>	£.	s.	d.	<i>Credit.</i>
Aunt's Legacy..	50,000.	0.	0.	
Ring	23.	0.	0.	
Railway Bill	5.	6.	0.	
Loss of 2 Apples.		10.	0.	19 Apples at 5/
	£50,028.	16.	0.	£4. 15. 0.

He flung himself on the sofa and groaned. In a short time he fell asleep and dreamed with his bandaged hand flung out on the cushion by the side of him. It was a terribly realistic dream, about a gold mesh bag belonging to a customer in a shop. The subsequent police court proceedings and imprisonment were very vivid.

A noise in the passage partially awakened him, but alas it was only partially. He turned over on the other side and went to sleep again. This time the dream was far worse. It entailed the murder of a child, whose throat he had caught in course of a game of "blindman's buff." It ended with the chaplain coming into the condemned cell to comfort his last moments.

Septimus waked up crying out with horror, his face was streaming with perspiration, and his hands were shaking. He wiped his head and face with a handkerchief and then sat on the edge of the sofa staring at the ceiling. Finally he got up and walked up and down the room.

"I can't go on like this," he mused. "I *must* find her." He thought for a little. Then he went to his writing table.

He made several copies of an advertisement, scratching out words and adding others. Finally he made a clear one, which read as follows:

"Old lady who wanted apples for sick son last week is begged to apply at same house. Gentleman will pay all expenses for same son and give all fruit needed."

Then he wrote a letter:

To Wilson's Press Agency:

Dear Sirs,

Kindly place enclosed advertisement in all local papers. Also have a hundred bills printed of same and paste about this neighborhood. I enclosed ten pounds. If more is required, please let me know.

Yours truly,

SEPTIMUS WARRINGTON BENNINGTON.

After Biggins had gone with the letter he took out his debit and credit account and added ten pounds to the debit side, which made the total worse than ever.

The business seemed getting worse, for that day he had three "Curse" incidents (as he began to call them) connected with a fork, a rose—the thorns of which pricked him very badly—and a bell push. The latter created a good deal of commotion in the house, Biggins and his wife being most indignant.

CHAPTER VI.

The next two days were very wet, and Septimus spent a good deal of his time, much to the wonder of Biggins, walking about his garden and orchard in a mackintosh and rubber boots. There was no sign of the gipsy and he began to wonder what he should do if the advertisement and the bills brought no result.

A third day passed, fine and warm. He gave up two engagements as he did not dare leave his premises in case his advertisement might be answered in his absence. He began to despair. The short and restless sleeps that he had at night were disturbed by agitated dreams.

On the fourth day, after his breakfast he walked into the orchard and sat down on a small bench. He could think of nothing else but the possibility of a future overshadowed by the Curse, and he became gloomier and gloomier as he thought of the possibilities.

When he had been sitting there for about half an hour, he heard a sound in the hedge behind him. He turned languidly to see what it was, then he tore frantically to the small gate leading to the wood and wrenched it open. The old gipsy woman was coming along the little path by the hedge. He ran to meet her, stammering in his excitement. She seemed to take no notice of him, and he fell on his knees at her feet, to the great detriment of his trousers, and lifted up his hands imploringly.

"I pray you to take off the Curse," he cried. "You

can take what you want. Here is money." He feverishly tore open his pocket book and pulled out notes. She shook her head and waved it away.

The perspiration came out in beads on his face and head. "Was she going to be adamant?" he wondered.

He got up and touched her arm. "Won't you do anything?" he almost sobbed. She walked on to the gate and stood there looking dreamily into the orchard.

"You saw the bills?" he asked tremblingly. She nodded, still looking at the apple trees.

"Well, then," he said. "May I do what I said? I will pay for the doctor. You can have what you want."

Then she turned her face and looked at him. He was too upset to notice the twinkle in her little black eyes.

"I want apples," she said quietly.

"Apples," he almost screamed. "You can have the lot if you want them. Here, come and take what you want."

She walked in, straight to his special tree, and stood looking up at the branches.

"Just wait a minute," he cried, and he ran down to the other gate, returning very shortly with a ladder. This he placed against the trunk of the tree and mounted.

"Hold open your apron," he called.

The woman did so. He threw the apples down into it, and, even in that moment of agitation, he realized how badly he was treating them.

She suddenly closed her apron, holding the corners collected in one hand.

"That's enough," she said, and he came down.

He stood shaking before her, looking at her imploringly.

They stared at each other for an appreciable time. Then she slowly lifted her hand and made some passes over him.

"You shall no longer hold what you do not wish," she said solemnly. Then she turned her back and trudged off to the gate. He ran after her.

"Can I do anything for your boy?" he said quickly. but beyond shaking her head, she took no notice of him whatever and walked on into the wood.

Septimus danced a breakdown in the dead leaves. Then he ran to the house. On the hall table there was a letter awaiting him in his Aunt's handwriting. He tore it open, feeling very anxious and worried. After he had read it he danced another breakdown in the hall and waved the letter over his head. He looked round, to find Biggins staring at him with his mouth wide open.

"It's all right, Biggins," he cried, "Mrs. Warrington is coming again to stay next week."

Biggins shut his mouth and smiled.

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